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UNEMPLOYMENT AND OCCUPATIONAL ASPIRATIONS:
A PANEL STUDY OF HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES

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ABSTRACT

Studies of young people's occupational aspirations have typically focussed on their correlates, but have not addressed the question of how aspirations may be modified as teenagers make the transition from school to the labour market. Given the distribution of jobs in the Canadian labour market, many of the high career aspirations of teenagers will not be satisfied. Data from a panel study of high school graduates in a large western Canadian city show how the experience of unemployment in the first year following graduation leads to a reduction in occupational aspirations. These findings are discussed in the context of the status attainment research literature, with reference to central sociological questions about the reproduction of social inequalities.

INTRODUCTION

Canadian teenagers have high occupational aspirations. When asked about the work they hope to do as an adult, a large majority specify high status managerial and professional jobs. One need only glance at the occupational distribution of the Canadian labour force to conclude that not all of these aspirations will be realized. What happens to them? Do they remain high and unmet? Or are they modified to reduce inconsistencies between hopes and outcomes?

Perhaps, as with young children who might wish to be a police officer one day and a teacher the next, the occupational aspirations of teenagers are only passing interests. If that was the case, these questions would be of minor consequence. However, by the time teenagers graduate from high school, we know that many have given serious thought to their employment future in the process of making decisions about higher education. Thus, occupational aspirations of high school graduates are an interesting reflection of the education and work values of the society in which they were shaped. Granted, these career preferences may not be completely stable. But rather than making them unsuitable for study, this points to a critical set of research questions about the structural constraints within which aspirations are formed and altered.

The status attainment research literature reveals how social origins influence occupational outcomes, both directly and indirectly through educational attainment. It also shows how career aspirations play an important part in this process, mediating the effects of family background on educational choices and, eventually, occupational outcomes. But career aspirations are more than just an intervening variable in a status attainment model. They also have a direct and independent effect on subsequent occupational attainment. Since location in the occupational hierarchy is a primary predictor of social status and standard of living, a clearer picture of the manner in which occupational aspirations are shaped will add to our understanding of the structure and process of stratification.

This paper asks whether labour market entry difficulties can dampen the occupational aspirations of youth. It tests the hypothesis that young people who experience unemployment soon after graduating from high school are more likely to lower their career aspirations. The discovery that a satisfactory job, or any job, is hard to find might lead a young person to conclude that future competition for desired jobs will be more intense than originally assumed. It might also lead to a questioning of one's ability to compete successfully in the labour market. In short, young graduates who have been unemployed may reassess their occupational aspirations, lowering them in order to reduce the possibility of failure.

Our data come from a panel study of the transition from school to work in the large western Canadian city of Edmonton. The global recession of the early 1980s and the collapse of oil prices led to a very rapid decline in the Alberta economy. Unemployment rates in Edmonton soared from around 4% in 1981 to over 14% in 1984 before beginning a slow decline. Youth unemployment rates went much higher, as they did elsewhere in the country. In May of 1985, when these graduating high school students were first surveyed, the unemployment rate for 15 to 19 year-olds in Alberta was 20%. A year later when the follow-up data were collected, it had fallen slightly to 18%. Thus, this study was undertaken at a time when youth unemployment in the province and the city was at its post-war peak. This cohort of high school graduates had a very high probability of encountering labour market entry difficulties. How did this affect their occupational aspirations?

OCCUPATIONAL ASPIRATIONS: PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The theoretical orientations and analytic methods of most North American studies of the occupational aspirations of youth can be traced back to the status attainment models pioneered by Blau and Duncan (1967). Their path analyses allowed them to link concerns about inter-generational status inheritance to questions about the importance of education in determining occupational outcome (Goyder, 1984:333; Krahn and Lowe, 1988:80). They showed, as have subsequent Canadian studies (Boyd et al., 1985), that educational achievement

and occupational status are strongly correlated. But social origins are also important, directly influencing occupational outcomes and indirectly affecting them via educational attainment. In short, children of higher status parents are typically better educated and, in time, are more likely to attain higher status occupations.

While these studies modelled the education and employment experiences of adults, the *Wisconsin school* surveyed youth to examine the social psychological dimensions of status attainment. Educational and occupational aspirations, academic performance and intellectual ability, self-esteem, and the expectations of significant others were all measured (e.g. Sewell et al., 1969; Alexander et al., 1975). Among other findings, aspirations were found to be influenced by parental expectations. In turn, they affected educational achievement. Aspirations also had a direct impact on eventual occupational status, independent of their effect through educational achievement (Haller and Portes, 1973). Thus, in elaborating the finer mechanisms of educational and occupational achievement, the Wisconsin school added a socialization perspective to the basic status attainment model (Kerckhoff, 1984:142).

With a few exceptions, Canadian researchers have incorporated social psychological variables into their studies of the occupational aspirations of youth. One of the more recent studies has suggested important modifications to the causal ordering of these intervening variables (Looker and Pineo, 1983). Canadian studies have also tended to pay more attention to gender ¹ and class (socio-economic status of parents) effects on occupational aspirations and outcomes, while still highlighting the central role of educational attainment. The original Wisconsin studies largely ignored young women, and placed a heavier interpretive emphasis on educational achievement.

Porter et al.'s (1982) longitudinal study of Ontario high school students in the early 1970s revealed very strong gender and class effects on aspirations and occupational outcomes, in addition to the effects of social psychological variables. This study also highlighted an important interaction effect -- young women of lower class origin had the lowest

aspirations (1982:293). Brinkerhoff and Corry (1976) reported higher aspirations among males in their Calgary study, as well as clear class effects on occupational goals.

Using 1971 Ontario data, Gilbert and McRoberts (1977) showed that youth from a higher status background had higher educational goals. They concluded that "schools serve to perpetuate existing inequalities" (1977:45). On the basis of their analysis of data from a six year panel study of 1973 Ontario high school graduates, Anisef et al. (1980) argued that post-secondary education "amplifies" the effects of social origins. Young people from higher status families had a higher probability of enrolment in "academic" high school programs. Graduation from such a program was an important determinant of university entrance. In turn, a university education typically translated into a higher status occupation.

It should be apparent from this literature review that we know little about the occupational aspirations of Canadian teenagers leaving high school in the 1980s. But that is not the only justification for this study. Previous research has tended to focus on the correlates of aspirations rather than their distribution. However, at least two recent studies, one Canadian (Baker, 1985) and the other American (Fottler and Bain, 1984), reveal that when the aspirations of young people are compared to the current distribution of occupations in the labour force, teenagers appear to be aiming much higher than their probabilities of success. Given the jobs available, not all can hope to attain the occupations to which they aspire. The question of what happens to these high aspirations has generally not been addressed. ²

We have suggested that labour market entry difficulties will dampen some of these aspirations. However, status attainment studies have generally overlooked labour market effects. Horan (1978) argues that the status attainment model reflects an overly individualistic, functionalist perception of the allocation of occupations, ³ and that it assumes an open, homogenous labour market within which status attainment processes unfold. Since labour market segmentation studies have severely undermined such a conception of the labour market, the pattern of differential opportunity structures must be built into the status attainment

explanatory framework (Campbell, 1983:59; Knottnerus, 1987:119).

The large research literature on labour market segmentation in Canada (Clairmont et al., 1983; Economic Council of Canada, 1987; Krahn and Lowe, 1988:84-93) clearly shows that the Canadian labour market is not equally open to all. Some groups of labour market participants encounter substantially greater structural constraints, and these constraints may change as economic conditions change. This perspective has begun to influence the questions asked, and the methods of analysis used, in status attainment research in Canada (Ornstein, 1983; Krahn and Gartrell, 1983; Boyd et al., 1985; Blakely and Harvey, 1988).

More specific studies of the labour market experiences of Canadian university graduates have also demonstrated the degree to which employment opportunities change with shifts in the economy and in the industrial and occupational structures (Harvey and Charner, 1975; Marsden et al., 1975; Harvey and Kalwa, 1983; Harvey, 1984). But this greater awareness of labour market effects on occupational outcomes has not yet transferred to studies of occupational aspirations.

However, two decades ago, a different type of study in Britain led to the conclusion that limited work opportunities can depress aspirations. Examining the patterns of transition from school to work of young men, Roberts (1968:174) concluded that the process "seems not to be for jobs to be entered upon the basis of ambitions, but for ambitions to be adapted to the occupations that young people find themselves able to enter." Several more recent British studies, some analyzing the transition from school to work and others discussing the reproduction of class inequalities, have also touched on this question.

Griffin (1985) interviewed young working class women in Birmingham. She noted how a sizeable minority of these young women had, at one point, wished to work in *male* jobs. But by the time they left school, lack of support and outright opposition had pushed them back into more "acceptable choices" (Griffin, 1985:80). Although this is not evidence of labour market

experiences lowering occupational aspirations, it demonstrates that aspirations can be depressed prior to labour market entry.

Blackman's (1987) study of teenage (11 to 16 year-olds) Londoners revealed, for both girls and boys, occupational expectations much lower than aspirations. These teenagers would have liked higher status jobs, but realistically expected much less. This occurs, Blackman (1987:44-46) argues, because these children are already conscious of the labour market. For boys, it is the threat of unemployment which leads to low expectations while, for girls, it is an awareness of the gender-based segmentation of the labour market. Again, such results do not prove that occupational aspirations can be modified by negative labour market experiences. But if knowledge of the labour market can affect aspirations, we might expect even more from experience.

Wallace (1987) conducted an extensive qualitative longitudinal study of the experiences of young people on the Isle of Sheppey as they left school and attempted to take on adult work and family roles. She interviewed her subjects before they left school, and then again one year and five years later after leaving school. In both sets of follow-up interviews, she found that the experience of unemployment and of being forced to accept low-status, unskilled work, had led to a distinct reduction in occupational aspirations (1987:39, 126).

However, neither Furlong (1987:67) nor Church and Blackman (1987:90) observed this dampening effect in their studies in Leicester and London, respectively. Furlong (1987:68) reasoned that occupational aspirations, formed over a long period of time, might not be expected to change quickly because of a sudden rise in unemployment. Aspirations might be maintained through various "image maintenance strategies", through not accepting personal responsibility for being unemployed, through continuing one's education, and so on. Observation of others who had been more successful might also allow one to maintain aspirations through periods of unemployment (Church and Blackman, 1982:82-3).

So, can negative labour market experiences push down the occupational aspirations of youth, or not? These studies which directly address the question provide us with mixed results. Different research methods might account for some of this, as might local labour market conditions. Furlong (1987:67), for example, suggests that aspirations might be more negatively affected in areas with longer traditions of widespread unemployment.

But there may be yet another explanation. Furlong (1987:60) notes that the occupations to which his Leicester students aspired just prior to leaving school "bore a close relationship to the local occupational structure." A parallel study of young school leavers in Leicester led to the same conclusion (Ashton and Maguire, 1986:3). Alternatively, Wallace (1987:68) reports that her sample members aspired to skilled jobs, to exciting and rewarding work, while the local labour market quite clearly had few such jobs to offer. This suggests that occupational aspirations are more likely to be dampened by labour market entry problems in a context of unusually high aspirations. More *realistic* aspirations might be better grounded in reasonably accurate knowledge of the labour market and, hence, might be more stable.

We cannot explain the higher aspirations on the Isle of Sheppey compared to the city of Leicester. Nor should we draw conclusions about British youth in general, although surveys of Scottish school leavers generally reveal realistic aspirations in terms of locally available jobs (Raffe, 1988:58), as did a study in south Wales (Brown, 1987:103). However, as noted earlier, recent Canadian and American studies have documented very high occupational aspirations among high school students (Baker, 1985; Fottler and Bain, 1984). Hence, the North American setting might be one where we would expect experiences of unemployment to push down the aspirations of youth.

In summary, these British studies provide examples of aspirations being modified by labour market difficulties, although the evidence is not fully supportive. They reinforce our earlier conclusion that studies of status attainment, and of the occupational aspirations of youth, must take the labour market into account. One approach would be to look for changes in

occupational aspirations among young people in depressed and in expanding labour markets. Another useful research design, the one we employ in this paper, would examine aspiration change among those reporting many and few labour market entry difficulties in a single labour market. This, by the way, was recommended over 30 years ago by Blau et al (1956:539) who suggested repeated interviews with labour market entrants "to discern how modifications in occupational expectations and values are produced by various social experiences, such as inability to get a job, expulsion from professional or vocational school, being repelled by unanticipated consequences of work, and many others."

Finally, this British research also helps place our study of aspirational change within a broader theoretical perspective on the structure and process of social stratification. A number of these studies (Griffin, 1985; Wallace, 1987; Brown, 1987) are part of a research literature attempting to account for the reproduction of class-based inequalities across generations (Willis, 1977; Jenkins, 1983; MacLeod, 1987). The status attainment literature, and particularly the Canadian contributions to it, has highlighted the degree to which occupational status is passed across generations. However, it has also tended to focus more on the role of education in providing access to higher status positions. Reproduction theories, on the other hand, have paid considerably more attention to the structural and institutional factors which recreate inequalities. Reminders of such influences are a useful corrective for the status attainment research tradition.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

Do labour market entry difficulties have a negative effect on occupational aspirations of high school graduates? This paper addresses this basic research question, but also examines the prior effects of socio-economic status and gender on the likelihood of unemployment and on aspiration change. The possibility of interactive effects involving gender are also explored. While a number of other related hypotheses have been tested in previous research (Empson-Warner, 1989) and are discussed in passing, tests of the following two hypotheses

are presented in this paper:

Hypothesis 1: Young people who experience unemployment after graduating from high school are more likely to lower their occupational aspirations in the year following graduation.

Hypothesis 2: Young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds will be more likely to encounter unemployment and, consequently, to report lowered aspirations.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

Our data come from an ongoing (1985-1989) panel study of the transition from school to work of high school and university graduates in three Canadian cities. ⁴ This paper focuses on one sub-sample of respondents in this longitudinal study, the 665 Edmonton teen-agers who graduated from twelfth grade in 1985. We compare the occupational aspirations they reported just prior to graduation (May, 1985) with their answers to the same question a year later (May, 1986).

Using a modified status attainment model, we then examine the effects of unemployment experiences in the intervening year on these Time 2 aspirations, controlling on the aspirations stated a year earlier. Despite our theoretical criticisms of the status attainment approach, its emphasis on precise measurement and causal modeling, and its incorporation of educational and status inheritance effects, make it the most useful method of addressing our research questions.

Since unlimited access to Edmonton high schools was not permitted, a multi-stage strategic sampling design was used for the initial survey. After negotiation with the Edmonton Public School Board, six high schools which served a range of middle and working class neighbourhoods were selected. Further discussions with the administration of these schools identified 66 classes of twelfth-graders, representing a mixture of academic and more vocational programs. Questionnaires were completed in these classrooms, with members of the

research team present, by a total of 983 students. Almost all students in attendance were willing to participate. Respondents were asked to provide their name, address and phone number for follow-up purposes. All but 89 (9%) did so, suggesting that the researchers' promise of confidentiality had been accepted.

The Time 2 survey was conducted by mail using a four-stage data collection strategy (initial questionnaire package, follow-up reminder letter, second questionnaire package, and telephone contact with an offer to mail a third questionnaire package). Sample attrition reduced the sample to the 665 individuals discussed in this paper. This response rate represented 68% of the total Time 1 sample, or 74% of those who had provided the follow-up information signifying willingness to participate in the longitudinal study.

A detailed analysis of possible sources of attrition bias identified only three basic differences between those who dropped out of the study and those who remained in it (Krahn, 1988:11-17). Female respondents, those who were more school-oriented (as demonstrated by higher grades, enrolment in an academic program, and plans to continue their education), and those who did not have a paying job while in twelfth grade (again, the more academically inclined) were more likely to have remained part of the study.⁵ To control on attrition bias, and because they are central explanatory variables in their own right, both gender and post-high school educational activity were included in the analyses reported below.

Other analyses of the data collected in this longitudinal study have shown the extent to which young people are prolonging their transition from school to work (Krahn and Lowe, 1990). In this sub-sample of Edmonton high school graduates, 71% of the 665 respondents had continued their education in some way in the year following graduation. Graduates with higher career goals were more likely to have stayed in school, as were those with a higher socio-economic background (Empson-Warner, 1989:66-67).

But those who stayed in school (a majority worked part-time) and those who left the educational system reported similar occupations and similar experiences of unemployment, and were equally likely to perceive unemployment to be a serious problem. This suggests that high school graduates without further educational credentials may find themselves working in the same low level *student labour market* as their part-time employed peers who remained in school (Empson-Warner, 1989:85; Krahn and Lowe, forthcoming).

Nevertheless, the effects of unemployment on aspirations may be quite different for young people who have left school completely. Continuing one's education may be a way of maintaining high aspirations, in spite of knowledge and experience of a difficult labour market. Consequently, a series of detailed analyses were undertaken to determine whether the effects of unemployment differed across these two groups. The results (not shown) revealed similar effects of unemployment on aspirations, and no interaction effects with gender, for those who stayed in school and those who left (Empson-Warner, 1989:101). Consequently, the two groups are combined in the analyses presented below.

MEASUREMENT

In both surveys, respondents were asked a pair of questions about career goals. The first, "what kind of job or career do you want eventually?" was followed by "what kind of job or career to you really expect to have eventually?" The two questions were meant to differentiate aspirations (preferences) from expectations (more realistic career goals). While academics have little trouble separating these two concepts, high school students appear to make few distinctions between them. After coding the responses into socio-economic status scores (Blishen et al., 1987), we found the two measures to be highly correlated at both Time 1 ($r = .85$) and Time 2 ($r = .93$). * Consequently, responses to the question about career aspirations (which had been answered by a slightly larger number of subjects) are used as the dependent variable in the analyses below.

Examination of the Time 1 distribution of aspirations revealed that 55 respondents had not reported a specific, codeable career goal. By Year 2, 152 failed to list a specific occupation to which they aspired, while an additional 31 subjects were in this category in both years. Thus, non-response reduced the sample available for over-time analysis from 665 to 427 subjects. The 238 subjects excluded from this analysis fit into three roughly equal size groups: those who listed two or more specific occupations, those who identified job characteristics (e.g. "I want a job that pays well.") rather than a specific occupation, and those who simply failed to answer the question.

This high level of career indecision does not mean this is an unusual sample. Other researchers have also observed similar results in their studies of North American teen-agers' occupational aspirations (Breton, 1972:17-18; Jepsen, 1975; Fottler and Bain, 1984:239; Alberta Advanced Education, 1989:67). However, in a study of labour market effects on occupational aspirations it is important to examine this phenomenon further, particularly since career indecision was more widespread a year after graduation than at the time of the initial survey.

Detailed comparisons of those who listed specific career goals at both Time 1 and Time 2 and those who did not were undertaken to determine whether: a) career indecision is related to background characteristics (age, sex, family's socio-economic status, and so on); and b) career indecision is influenced by negative labour market experiences, including unemployment. These analyses demonstrated that, with minor exceptions, the two groups did not differ significantly (Empson-Warner, 1989:89-92). Thus, the reasons for more widespread career indecision at Time 2 remain unclear. However, evidence that unemployment was not responsible for the change allows us to proceed to a test of our central hypotheses with a reduced sample of 427 respondents.

Unemployment between Time 1 and Time 2 was operationalized with responses to a question about being "out of work and looking for a job but unable to find one". A binary

measure which distinguished those who had been unemployed at some point in the previous twelve months (one-third of the subjects) ⁷ from those who had not is used below to signify labour market entry difficulties.

An alternative measure (months of unemployment) led to similar conclusions, but this variable was rejected because of its highly skewed distribution. Since unemployment serves as both an independent and dependent variable in our causal model, logistic or probit regression techniques would be more appropriate than the standard multiple regression techniques we employ. However, as noted below, none of the prior variables in our path model had a significant effect on unemployment. Hence, this binary variable acts only as an independent variable in our analyses.

Three other variables were included in our basic path model. Socio-economic status (SES) was operationalized with an index combining mother's and father's education and father's occupation. ⁸ Academic performance was measured by the students' self-reports of their average grades in the past year, with values of 1 (under 50%) to 5 (over 80%). A binary variable was used to identify school program with academic programs coded as "1" and non-academic programs identified as "0".

RESULTS

Our review of previous research suggested that, if young people's occupational aspirations were unusually high, they would be more likely to be reduced in the face of a difficult labour market. In order to determine whether this condition is met in this study, Table 1 compares the aspirations of our respondents, just prior to graduation from high school in 1985, with the 1981 distribution of occupations in the Canadian labour force.

Higher status occupations are clearly over-represented in the goals of these high school seniors, with over two-thirds (69.5%) aspiring to positions at the middle management level or higher. But, in 1981, less than one-quarter (23.7%) of all jobs in the Canadian labour force were

Table 1: Occupational aspirations of Edmonton high school students, 1985, and occupations of the Canadian labour force, 1981.

Occupational category *	Percent	
	Student aspirations, 1985	Canadian labour force, 1981 #
Self-employed professionals	11.6	0.8
Employed professionals	24.7	7.7
High-level management	1.6	3.9
Semi-professionals	19.3	5.6
Technicians	5.4	1.8
Middle management	6.9	3.9
Supervisors	2.8	3.3
Foremen	0.2	3.3
Skilled clerical-sales-service	5.9	10.6
Skilled crafts and trades	9.3	11.3
Farmers	0.2	0.2
Semi-skilled clerical-sales-service	7.6	16.9
Semi-skilled manual	2.2	11.3
Unskilled clerical-sales-service	1.6	4.3
Unskilled manual	0.5	13.7
Farm labourers	0.3	1.3
TOTAL	100.0	100.0

* Occupational categories developed by Pineo (1985).

Canadian census data (1981) presented by Hiller (1986:80).

at this level. Looking only at professional occupations which accounted for 8.5% of all labour force positions in 1981, we find 36.3% of our sample reporting such high status career goals. In contrast, only 11.9% of these twelfth-graders mentioned semi-skilled or unskilled jobs when asked about their aspirations, although almost half (46.2%) of all labour force participants in Canada reported such occupations in 1981.

Although the majority of our sample members went on to post-secondary education, making higher career goals more reasonable, these comparisons indicate that many young people are unlikely to realize their occupational goals. The overall level of aspirations is extremely high, compared to the actual occupational structure of the Canadian labour market. Given the depressed state of the local economy at the time of the study, the two important conditions necessary for a test of our hypotheses -- high occupational aspirations among youth and a difficult labour market -- are clearly met.

We began our analyses by examining the determinants of aspirations at Time 1, thus replicating previous cross-sectional studies (Empson-Warner, 1989:49-61). The expected indirect effects of SES on career goals (via academic/non-academic high school program) were observed. Gender did not have a significant effect on aspirations, or on any of the intervening variables. However, some gender interactions were observed when the model was tested separately for male and female subjects, highlighting the need for tests of interaction in the extended (longitudinal) model.

In this extended model, occupational aspirations reported at Time 2 were modelled as a function of aspirations at Time 1, unemployment in the intervening year, academic performance and school program in twelfth grade, and SES. Experience of unemployment during 1985-86 could be affected by Time 1 aspirations, the two education measures and the SES index. Time 1 aspirations were cast as a function of academic performance, school program and SES, with the latter two variables serving as the exogenous variables in the model. Because of the interaction effects noted in the cross-sectional model, this extended model was

tested separately for female and male subjects, and accounted for 51.7% and 61.2% of the variance in Time 2 aspirations, respectively.

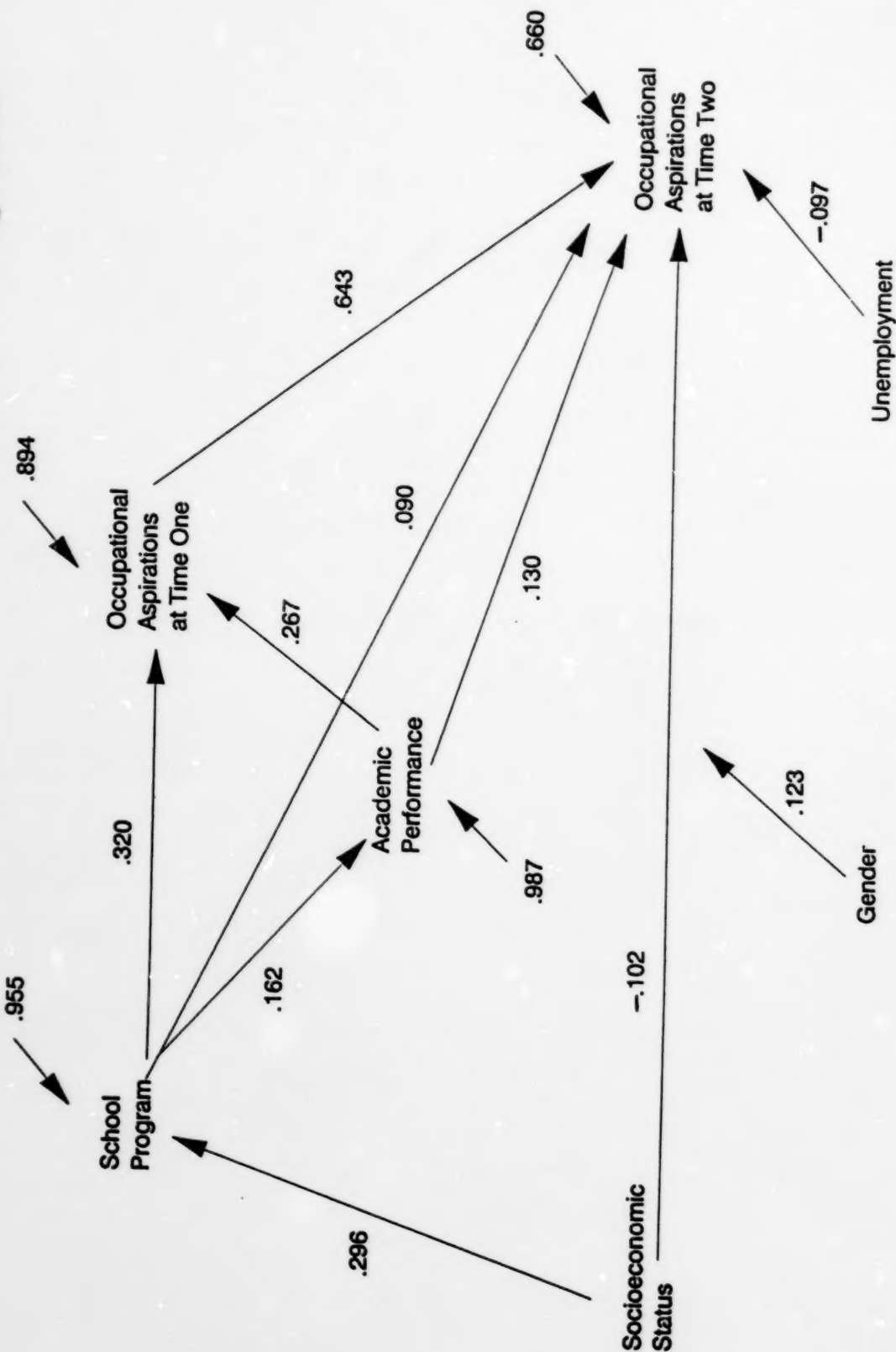
In our next more formal test for gender interactions, male and female subjects were combined, a binary variable for gender was introduced, and three gender interaction terms were added to the extended model. These three cross-product terms (gender by academic performance; gender by SES; gender by unemployment) were introduced because of differences in slopes observed when comparing the separate male and female models in the previous analyses.

Only one of these interaction terms (gender by SES) was found to have a significant effect on Time 2 aspirations. Again, gender did not have a significant additive effect on aspirations (at either Time 1 or Time 2), or on any of the intervening variables in the model. Consequently, the final model (Figure 1) combined female and male subjects, omitted gender as an exogenous variable, included the gender-SES interaction term, and was calculated with non-significant ($p < .05$) paths omitted. Cumulative non-response further reduced the sample to 341. A total of 56.5% of the variation in Time 2 occupational aspirations was accounted for by this set of variables and one interaction term.

The strong effect of Time 1 aspirations on Time 2 aspirations (.643) is as expected, reflecting a fair amount of stability in career goals over time (at least among those who answered this question in both the 1985 and 1986 questionnaires). Other researchers have also noted this stability (Smith, 1980:126), but our research goes beyond such findings to focus on the factors which might lead to changes in aspirations over time.

Our first hypothesis proposed that occupational aspirations would be negatively influenced by labour market entry difficulties in the year following graduation from high school. The significant direct effect of unemployment on Time 2 aspirations (-.097), controlling on Time 1 aspirations and the other variables in this model (Figure 1), demonstrates support for this

Figure 1: Influences on Occupational Aspirations One Year After Graduation From High School *



* Only significant paths ($p < .05$) are shown in path diagram ($N=341$).

hypothesis. The unstandardized slope of -3.57 indicates that those high school graduates who had experienced unemployment at some point in the past year had, on average, reduced their occupational aspirations by close to four points on the Blisshen occupational status scale.

Our second hypothesis predicted that graduates from lower socio-economic backgrounds would be more likely to encounter unemployment and, in turn, would be more likely to reduce their career goals between Time 1 and Time 2. However, Figure 1 reveals that SES did not have a significant effect on unemployment. In fact, none of the prior variables in our extended model had a significant effect on unemployment, leaving it to act as a third exogenous variable in the model. Thus, we fail to find support for our second hypothesis.

Nevertheless, SES did affect Time 2 career goals indirectly through school program. Young people with higher status parents were more likely to have completed an academic high school program which, in turn, led to higher occupational aspirations (Figure 1). As for direct effects of SES on Time 2 aspirations, the significant interaction effect involving gender revealed these to be different for female and male respondents.

Since the binary variable for gender assigned a value of 0 to female respondents and 1 to males, the coefficient of -.102 on the direct path linking SES and Time 2 aspirations means that higher status female respondents were reporting lower Time 2 aspirations, controlling on their career goals at Time 1 and on other variables in the model.¹⁰ Explanations of this finding are not immediately apparent. The size of the effect for males is obtained by adding the standardized slope for the interaction term (.123) and for the female effect (-.102). The sum (.02) is negligible, demonstrating that, for male high school graduates, there is not a significant direct effect of SES on Time 2 aspirations, controlling on the other variables in this extended model.

DISCUSSION

Previous Canadian and U.S. studies of the career goals of young people have focused on the factors leading to higher or lower goals, and on the relationship between these goals and occupational outcomes. But they have not really taken note of the very high aspirations of North American youth. Nor have they addressed the question of what happens to such aspirations as young people enter a labour market where many of these goals will not be met. Our results show that the experience of unemployment in the first year following graduation from high school can lead to a significant lowering of occupational aspirations.

This is also an important finding within the context of debates about the consequences of youth unemployment (Furnham, 1985; Feather and O'Brien, 1986), since less is known about the longer-term effects of joblessness among young people. In addition, it adds to our understanding of the subjective side of the process of transition from school to work and from youth to adulthood (Hogan and Astone, 1986; Heinz, 1987; Ashton and Lowe, 1990). And it immediately points to other research questions. Some are social-psychological in orientation, enquiring about the formation and modification of career aspirations. Others are structural, addressing the linkages between social origins, educational institutions, labour markets, and status attainment.

We speculated at the outset that a reduction of career goals, following the experience of unemployment, might be a way in which young people could reduce the possibility of personal failure. Our panel data demonstrate the hypothesized decline in aspirations, but other more qualitative research designs would be needed to substantiate our explanation. For example, with a longitudinal qualitative study one could remind a young person of the career goals they had mentioned a year (or more) earlier, and then ask why they had changed their goals. Claire Wallace (1987:126) did this in her study of young people on the Isle of Sheppey, and found that many had forgotten their earlier aspirations. Thus, while unemployment clearly

has a depressing effect on career goals, the process may not be one of which young people are all that conscious.

While unemployment had a significant net negative effect on occupational aspirations, why was its impact not larger? Part of the answer might lie in the various "image maintenance strategies" (Furlong, 1987) available to our sample members, most noticeably, the opportunity to remain in the education system. Our analyses did not reveal significant differences (in the effects of unemployment on aspirations) between those who left school and the majority who did not. Thus, it may be that staying in school, but also keeping open the option of returning to school, can modify the negative effects of unemployment on career goals. The relatively short time period covered by this study might also be part of the explanation. Longer and more periods of unemployment might eventually come to have a more substantial depressing effect. Further research monitoring changes in career goals as a function of labour market experiences over a longer time period would clearly be of value.

We have documented one of the ways in which high occupational aspirations might be reduced as young students become adult workers. Nevertheless, it is clear that the overall distribution of career goals at Time 2 was still very unlike the occupational structure of the labour force as a whole. What other factors ultimately play a part in reducing the discrepancy between youthful hopes and dreams, and adult career realities, since it is obvious that not all of these high aspirations will be fulfilled?

Several classic studies in the sociology of work (Chinoy, 1955; Sennett and Cobb, 1972) suggest that adult male blue collar workers might, over the course of their career, redefine their personal definition of career success, putting more emphasis on pay and job security, the possibility of home ownership, and the provision of educational opportunities for their children (Krahn and Lowe, 1988:157). However, there has been little, if any, North American research documenting such changes among young people leaving school. Thus, Wallace's (1987) British study would be an excellent model for further research.

It is interesting to frame our social-psychological question about factors affecting young people's career goals within the context of the changing North American industrial and occupational structures. In the 1960s and 1970s, industrial expansion and growth in white-collar occupations meant that a larger proportion of young people could expect to leave school and move into relatively high status positions. These graduates were, more often than today, children of blue-collar parents. Hence, socialized career goals might have been somewhat less grand while occupational opportunities were expanding. Today, the situation may be reversed. Young people with very high career goals are leaving school and entering a service-dominated labour market which, while offering a considerable number of high status jobs, also contains a substantial number of less rewarding jobs (Economic Council of Canada, 1990). This suggests a growing gap between aspirations and outcomes and highlights the critical nature of our basic research question.

Our observations about *unrealistically* high aspirations should not be read as evaluative statements. While we would obviously recommend that high school students be given as much labour market information as possible to ensure informed career choices, we are not arguing that young people are *aiming too high*. We are merely using the term in a probabilistic sense, noting that not all graduates with high goals will reach them. However, the idea of *aiming high* does return us to broader theoretical questions about the structure and process of stratification.

Beliefs about the necessity of higher education for career success, the need for equality of educational opportunity, and the importance of *aiming high* are central to the North American value system. These beliefs have some basis in fact, as demonstrated by the evidence, in the status attainment literature, of education positively affecting occupational attainment. But the same research has also demonstrated a considerable amount of inter-generational transmission of status within a system that promises, and also provides some avenues for, upward mobility. Evidence that unemployment can affect occupational aspirations

shaped by the educational system brings us back to central sociological questions about the reproduction of social inequalities.

Our second hypothesis was influenced by such questions. We proposed that young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds would be more likely to encounter unemployment and, in turn, report reduced career goals. However, we found that SES did not have a significant effect on the probability of unemployment in the year following graduation from high school. It may be that when unemployment rates are very high (as they were in Edmonton in 1985-86), labour market difficulties will be encountered by a broader range of people, not just by those of lower class standing.¹¹ This might be even more true for young people employed in a *student labour market* composed of relatively low status, often part-time jobs. In such a labour market, class origins might provide fewer advantages.

However, the lack of support for our second hypothesis does not mean that SES is unimportant. Our analyses clearly showed that young people from more advantaged families were more likely to have completed an academic high school program which, in turn, positively affected career goals at both Time 1 and 2. Furthermore, SES affected aspirations indirectly through program and academic performance. Thus, our extended status attainment model demonstrated that social origins do play a part in aspirations. And, as all of the previous literature on career goals has shown, "There is a strong relationship between aspirations and occupational outcomes; if individuals do not even aspire to middle-class jobs, they are unlikely to obtain them." (MacLeod, 1987:2).

Finally, support for our first hypothesis that unemployment can affect career goals demonstrates that labour market variables can be successfully built into status attainment models. Further attempts to include other measures of labour market experience and opportunity within such models will, we believe, broaden the explanatory value of this research method.

NOTES:

1. Among the exceptions, MacKinnon and Anisef (1979) surveyed only male 12th grade students in Ontario to examine the relative effect of different social psychological variables on the formation of aspirations and on occupational outcomes. Breton (1972) included young women in his study, but did not carry his analysis of their plans beyond questioning whether or not they intended to pursue a career. His analysis of data obtained from male respondents was much more extensive.

2. The observation by Porter et al. (1982:96-97) that students in lower grades have the highest occupational aspirations hints at a process whereby such hopes decline over time. In attempting to explain the high aspirations of American youth, Fottler and Bain (1984) point out that young people know relatively little about the labour market and may be highly influenced by the mass media which tend to overemphasize higher status occupations. They also suggest that initially high career goals may be a part of an adaptive process of occupational choice in which aspirations are modified as new information is received. This argument resembles ours in some respects. Encountering a difficult labour market involves receiving new information about the availability of desirable jobs, and may lead to the modification of aspirations. However, its tone is overly voluntaristic, resembling that of "occupational choice" theories which portray the formation of aspirations as a developmental process culminating in the choice of an occupation suitable to one's ambitions and abilities (Super, 1980; Holland, 1973). Such theories largely ignore the prior effects of class and gender, and overlook the degree to which "attainments are constrained by opportunity structures" (Roberts, 1968:174).

3. American researchers have not emphasized the *class effect* as much as have Canadian students of status attainment. This may help explain why Horan (1978) does not credit the status attainment research literature with emphasizing the inter-generational transmission of status and privilege, a process which is not part of a functionalist model of the allocation of occupational status and employment rewards.

4. This panel study also included a parallel survey of university graduates, and was conducted in Toronto and Sudbury as well as in Edmonton. While only Year 1 - Year 2 data are examined here, a third survey of the same individuals was completed in 1987 and a fourth in 1989. See Krahn (1988) for additional information on research design.

5. This search for attrition bias was undertaken with the Year 1-2-3 (1985-87) data set in which the Edmonton high school sample had been reduced to 547 respondents (56% of the original 983). Since this paper examines the somewhat larger Year 2 sample (N = 665), the attrition biases identified would not be as pronounced.

6. While a number of other researchers have noted few differences between occupational aspirations and expectations of young people (Breton, 1972; Brinkerhoff and Corry, 1976), others have observed larger discrepancies between responses to questions intended to measure these two concepts (Haller et al., 1974; Crysdale, 1975; Porter et al., 1982). An explanation for these mixed results is not immediately apparent, although different question wording might be partially responsible.

7. The 1986 national Labour Market Activity Survey revealed a similar proportion (32.5%) of 16 to 19 year olds reporting at least one period of unemployment during the year (Statistics Canada, 1988).

8. The index was an average of (standardized) measures of both parents' highest level of education, and the Blishen score (Blishen et al., 1987) for the father's occupation ($\text{Alpha} = .78$). Because a substantial proportion of respondents reported their mother's occupation as "housewife", inclusion of maternal occupation reduced the sample size considerably. A series of analyses that included maternal occupation, and others that used binary measures of whether the mother was in the labour force, and whether or not she had a higher status occupation, failed to identify any significant changes in the pattern of results.

9. Evidence that those who had been unemployed in the previous year also reported lower aspirations at Time 2 would not be a conclusive test of our first hypothesis. Since aspirations at Time 1 and 2 would be expected to be positively correlated, this relationship could simply mean that those with lower Time 1 aspirations were more likely to encounter unemployment. Consequently, it is necessary to control on Time 1 aspirations when examining the effects of unemployment on Time 2 aspirations.

10. The effect of the gender-SES interaction term (.123) is displayed on the separate path from gender to the path linking SES and Time 2 aspirations. For a discussion of the presentation of multiple regression interaction effects, see Hayduk and Wonnacott (1980).

11. Ashton and Maguire (1986) found that in a period of very high unemployment, social origins and educational attainment continued to play a part in occupational attainment of young people. But local labour market conditions played a much more important part. In other words, if the local economy is very depressed, (almost) everyone will be affected.

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